

Increased nomenclatural stability through Lists of Names in Current Use

The International Union of Biological Sciences sponsored a meeting at Kew (U.K.) on 22–23 April 1988 to consider the desirability and feasibility of preparing internationally recognised lists of botanical names in current use, and of according such names a protected nomenclatural status. Although the meeting was concerned with plant names the subject is relevant to biology as a whole, and the participants included the President and the Executive Secretary of the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature.

The following is the text of a letter which the meeting agreed to distribute to appropriate journals. Comments on the application of the proposals to zoological nomenclature are welcome, and should be sent to the Commission Secretariat.

Sir,

The pressure from the users of names of organisms on taxonomists to produce more stable systems of names is increasing^{1–4}. Names change for one of two reasons: the strict application of the rule of priority or other nomenclatural caveats of the appropriate International Code, or new knowledge on the circumscription, rank or position of a taxon. Changes of the latter kind relate to the advancement of scientific knowledge, and are of value to users in indicating not only relationships but also physiological and biochemical attributes. Changes for nomenclatural reasons alone, in contrast, benefit no-one.

In perpetuating the present system, taxonomists are failing to satisfy a key requirement of their consumers⁵ and it is therefore not surprising that support for taxonomic research and services is meagre and only grudgingly obtained. The problems of the instability of names have become accentuated by the needs of the information service industry for data retrieval, and the requirements of health, trade, conservation, and quarantine authorities for stable names to use in legislation, regulations, and property rights protection. Action is long overdue and urgently needed not only to satisfy the demands of users of names, but further to restore something of the lost credit of taxonomists in the sight of their consumers.

Bacteriologists overcame this problem in 1980 by the adoption of a new starting date for nomenclature and the publication of an 'Approved List' of names^{6–7}; only 2,500 of 30,000 species names were listed. In the case of groups covered by the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature (ICBN) there are about 36,500 generic and 400,000 species names in use, out of about 79,000 generic and 1,700,000 species names published. It has been suggested that approved lists of names are issued at five-yearly intervals⁸, that a list of currently accepted names of the world's flora be produced which could be accorded some specially protected nomenclatural status⁹, and in zoology that particular works be granted a protected status^{10–11}.

Proposals to introduce formal procedures for the registration of newly published names¹² were debated during the XIV International Botanical Congress in Berlin in July 1987. A Special Committee on Registration was established, which is to report to the next Congress in Tokyo in 1993. However, such a process would not overcome the instability caused by the repeated re-introduction of long-forgotten names. The Inter-

national Union of Biological Sciences (IUBS), with the support of the International Association for Plant Taxonomy (IAPT), sponsored an international meeting at Kew on 22–23 April 1988 to consider the feasibility of the production of lists of names in current use for all groups of organisms covered by the ICBN; i.e. living and fossil flowering plants, ferns, mosses, hepatics, algae, cyanobacteria, fungi (including lichens), and certain protoctists. The meeting was attended by 23 specialists, including key personnel associated with the current cataloguing of names (i.e. the *Index Algarum*, *Index of Fungi*, *Index Kewensis*, *Index Muscorum*, *Index Nominum Genericorum*), together with representatives of selected user groups. The key conclusions of this meeting, a full report of which will appear in both *Biology International* and *Taxon*, were:

- (1) The preparation of lists of names in current use is in itself a worthwhile objective. Moreover, it would, if such lists were accorded specially protected nomenclatural status over all names not on the list by a future International Botanical Congress, promote stability in names by almost entirely eliminating the majority of name changes due to nomenclatural reasons.
- (2) It is now technically feasible, in the light of machine-readable card files which have already been compiled, to produce lists of the approximately 36,500 generic names in current use for all groups covered by the ICBN, given the necessary international support. The starting point for such a list is the IAPT *Index Nominum Genericorum* database held at the Smithsonian Institution, and publication is to be realised in 1991.
- (3) The situation with respect to the approximately 400,000 species names in current use varies markedly from group to group, and such lists will have to be prepared on a group by group basis; pilot studies can now feasibly be carried out (e.g. legumes, mosses, yeasts) provided that the necessary resources are made available.
- (4) IUBS, through its Commission on the Nomenclature of Plants (General Committee), should be encouraged to establish a Special Committee on Names in Current Use charged to make formal and detailed proposals to the next International Botanical Congress with respect to granting special status to the lists of generic names, to consider appropriate mechanisms for updating them, and to define procedures for the preparation and adoption of species names lists.
- (5) The newly appointed Special Committee shall work in collaboration with that on Registration already established, which is considering the question of the registration of newly published names. The work of the two Committees is entirely complementary.
- (6) The proposals developed at the Kew meeting need to be widely publicised to promote discussion amongst users of names, not only systematists.
- (7) The IUBS should be encouraged to adopt this task as a part of its forthcoming Scientific Programme for 1988–91, and to secure international funding to assist in the preparation and publication of the generic and sample species names lists.

If the necessary resources can be made available, there is now a scenario available which, if accepted by the biological community at large, would materially improve the stability of names of all organisms covered by the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature. The participants in the Kew meeting wish to encourage a lively in-depth debate on this matter, and invite comments from both users and taxonomists, which

will be made available to the proposed Special Committee which will be responsible for both the production of the generic and pilot species lists, and the preparation of detailed proposals for decision at the 1993 International Botanical Congress.

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